

*The following is from Rev. Ben Disney's email last week, and I wanted to share this again.*

## **CONFLICT: ENGAGE IT WELL**

**Three things are inevitable:**

- 1. Death**
- 2. Taxes**
- 3. Conflict in the Church**

It's an old joke. A man was shipwrecked on a deserted island. He was an industrious, hard-working individual, so by the time he was rescued, 15 years later, he had managed to transform the island into a collection of roads and buildings. The people who rescued him were amazed at his accomplishments and asked for a tour of the island.

He was more than happy to oblige.

"The first building on our left," he began, "is my house. I built a comfortable three-bedroom home, complete with indoor plumbing. The rescue party was astonished. "What's that other building," they asked. The man replied, "Oh, that building over there is the store where I do my grocery shopping and across the street is the gym I built where I exercise every day."

The rescuers noticed two other buildings and asked what they were. "The one on the left is where I go to church."

"And the one on the right?" they inquired.

"Oh, that's where I used to go to church."

Early on in my ministry, it would have been helpful had someone told me that conflict in the church is inevitable. Like most pastors, I assumed the very best in people and believed the church was a place where people live into a higher calling of living into the context of a faith community based on mutual love, forgiveness and peace. Somehow, I had missed most of the New Testament including Paul's letters to churches embroiled in deep, divisive conflicts. Like most pastors, I was initially unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with the damage to the church and the broken relationships that resulted in unhealthy conflict. Over time, most of us accept the fact that conflict in the church is inevitable. We also learn the hard way the real difference between healthy and unhealthy conflict.

There are invaluable resources available that can help you manage and understand how to handle church conflict in a healthy way. In a recent blog, Carey Nieuwhof summarizes it as well as anyone. Here's his advice. Pay attention because it might just save your church and your ministry:

"I think Christians often struggle with conflict because:

In the name of grace, we feel we need to sacrifice truth.

When we speak truth, we often don't know how to speak it with grace.

We worry about hurting other people's feelings when one of the best things we can do is offer honest feedback.

We're not sure how to support someone we genuinely disagree with.

None of that needs to be.

*Here are seven ways that I hope can help you resolve conflict:*

### **1. Own your part of the conflict**

Conflict and even bad chemistry is almost never 100% one person's fault. Thinking you're not part of the problem is often the problem. One of the best expressions I've heard of how to figure out the extent to which you might be part of the problem is to ask a compelling question: What's it like to be on the other side of me?

## 2. **Go direct**

Often issues are mishandled because we talk about someone rather than to someone. Your co-worker at the water cooler isn't the problem, so why talk to him about it? Jesus was crystal clear on how to handle conflict, but very few Christians follow his practice. In the name of being 'nice' ("I can't tell her that!"), we become ineffective. Talk to the person you have the problem with. Directly. If you haven't got the courage to do it, maybe the problem isn't even big enough to worry about. When you're in conflict, stop talking about people. Start talking to them.

## 3. **Believe the best about others**

It's easy to assign bad motives to people. Instead, give them the benefit of the doubt. They might not realize how they are coming across. Believe the best about others; don't assume the worst. Believing the best can help you address an issue directly without ruining the relationship. It can turn hurtful into helpful. Here's an example: "Rachel, you might not realize this, but sometimes your emails can come across as demanding or even demeaning. I'm not sure you're aware of that, but I just wanted to let you know how they leave me feeling sometimes. I know you probably don't mean to do that." That gives the person an out, and frankly, many times, they probably had no idea they were coming across negatively. When you believe the best about others, you tend to get the best from others.

## 4. **Explain—don't blame**

How to talk to the person you're struggling with is where many people struggle. And those conversations often go sideways because people begin with blame. Don't blame. Explain. Instead of saying "You always" or "You never" (which might be how you feel like starting), begin by talking about how you experience them. If you're dealing with an 'angry person' for example, you might frame it this way: "Jake, I just want you to know that when you get upset in a meeting, it makes me feel like the discussion is over, and I can't make a contribution." If you're dealing with gossip, try something like: "Ryan, on Tuesday when you told me what happened to Greg on the weekend, I felt like that was something Greg should have told me directly." Do you hear the difference between explaining and blaming? Blaming others is a guarantee that the only person who won't grow is you.

## 5. **Be specific**

Giving one or two specific incidents is much better than making general accusations or commenting on personality traits. “The other day in the meeting” or “In your email on the August numbers yesterday” is much more helpful than “You just always seem so frustrated.” The more specific you are, the more you de-escalate conflict and move toward a hopeful ending.

## 6. **Tell them you want things to get better**

What the person you’re confronting needs is hope. At this point, they probably feel defensive, ashamed and (hopefully) sorry. Let them know the gifts they bring to the table and the good they do. Tell them you are looking forward to the future and want things to work out.

## 7. **Pray for them**

I know this sounds trite, but it’s not. Don’t pray about them. Pray for them. It is almost impossible to stay angry with someone you pray for.

These words come from someone who has obviously experienced conflict firsthand, and I think Carey Nieuwhof is spot on. Remember, conflict is inevitable; fighting is optional.

Thank you for your courageous and faithful leadership especially in difficult circumstances.